



# Congressional Record

PROCEEDINGS AND DEBATES OF THE *109th* CONGRESS, FIRST SESSION

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*Hon. Steve Israel*

*In the House of Representatives*

Friday, September 29, 2006

Mr. Speaker, all of us can celebrate this conference report and the support that it provides to our troops. It is a good product, and we have had some hard-fought differences on various issues.

For me, we have been grappling with the proper balance between religious expression and tolerance in the military. I am very pleased that this conference report struck language that in my view would have made it easier to engage in certain practices by overturning existing DOD standards on tolerance of all faiths. And I thank my ranking member, Mr. Skelton, and I thank Senators Warner and Levin of the other body, the Department of Defense, and many, many different religious organizations, from the National Conference on Ministry to the Armed Forces, to the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops, to the American Jewish Committee and so many others. They understand this is not just an issue of tolerance, Mr. Speaker, it is an issue of good order and discipline and unit cohesion.

We maintain the overall language requiring respect of all religious faiths, but this language does reopen a loophole, a loophole that allowed commanders and chaplains at the Air Force Academy to chastise cadets for not attending certain religious services, a loophole that allowed one chaplain to tell cadets of all faiths that some of them would burn in the eternal flames of hell for not following his faith. So we still have some work to do, and we still have some good-faith discussions ahead of us.

And I want to take this opportunity to say something to my friends on the other side of the aisle and on the other side of this issue, people who I respect and admire a great deal. I want to continue working with them. I have been troubled by the occasional rhetorical excess that has suggested, because I am opposed to proselytizing of any specific religion on any military base, I am somehow trying to stop people from invoking the name of Jesus in their prayers.

Nothing could be further from the truth. People should be able to pray how they want, when they want, where they want, and to whom they want. They just can't compel others to join them.

For those of you who truly believe that the chaplain who told cadets willing to die in the defense of freedom that after they died they would burn in the eternal flames of hell, well, you and I have some profound differences on that issue. So profound that I don't think the issue should be decided in 3 weeks of discussion in a House-Senate conference. It ought to be put before the American people in hearings.

And I want to close, Mr. Speaker, by suggesting that, as we move forward in trying to resolve this issue, we all rededicate ourselves to the spirit of openness, sensitivity, tolerance, and respect. And don't take my word for it, Mr. Speaker, because behind me, carved into this wood dais on the floor of the United States House of Representatives, is the word "tolerance," right in the center. That word must remain with us. My speech will come and go. This word will always stay. That is what makes our military great. That is what makes our country worth fighting for.